



Testimony of

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Government Administration and Elections Committee  
March 25, 2022

***HB 5495 An Act Concerning Government Administration***

***SB 473 An Act Concerning the State Contracting Standards Board***

***SB 471 An Act Concerning Elections and State Voting Rights***

***HJ 114 Resolution Proposing an Amendment to the State Constitution to Permit  
No-Excuse Absentee Voting***

Good afternoon Senator Flexer, Representative Fox and distinguished members of the GAE Committee. My name is Ed Hawthorne, and I am proud to serve as the President of the Connecticut AFL-CIO, a federation of hundreds of local unions representing more than 200,000 workers in the private sector, public sector, and building trades. Our members live and work in every city and town in our state and reflect the diversity that makes Connecticut great. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today in support of HB 5495, SB 473, SB 471 and HJ 114.

**HB 5495 An Act Concerning Government Administration - SUPPORT**

Sections 1 through 10 of this bill re-establish the Program Review and Investigations (PRI) Committee. PRI was established in 1972 and was the only committee in the General Assembly that examined state programs and systems to determine efficiency, effectiveness and compliance with legislative intent. The committee also had authority to conduct investigations, issue subpoenas and raise bills to modify government agency practices. Its specialized function allowed the Committee and its staff to perform in-depth investigative and comparative research and analysis, often studying an issue for a year or two before offering informed policy recommendations.

PRI issued several high-profile reports during its tenure, including a number of studies that directly impacted Connecticut's workers. The 2005 Binding Arbitration for Municipal and School Employees report dispelled long-held beliefs that the system was weighted in favor of employees by empirically demonstrating the opposite. The Committee also did important work on unemployment and workers' compensation systems, prevailing wage laws and apprenticeship programs, standards for paraprofessionals and staffing issues in a number of industries.

Despite identifying hundreds of millions of dollars in cost savings over the course of its existence, PRI's own funding was eliminated during 2016 budget negotiations. The in-depth, non-partisan, thoughtful research performed by PRI has been deeply missed. There are few, if any, other sources of competent information and research on which both parties can trust and rely on to make policy decisions. Since PRI was disbanded, so-called think tanks like the

Yankee Institute, have attempted to fill the void and mislead with thinly-veiled partisan and ideological “research.” We heartily welcome this proposal to re-establish PRI and urge the Committee to support it.

Section 11 of HB 5495 improves the state’s contractor prequalification process by serving as a reporting mechanism to the Department of Administrative Services (DAS). Currently, the disclosure of contractor settlements with the Department of Labor (DOL) are not made available to DAS. Such settlements involve wage violations and civil penalties. Because these settlements are not considered adjudications, they are not disclosed to DAS. If a company applying for prequalification has multiple settlements with the DOL, DAS would not see that information on the application.

Public contracts awarded at \$500,000 or more, funded wholly or in part with public monies, must be prequalified by the State. While most state contractors are responsible and trustworthy employers, there are those who violate wage laws and have been ordered to pay back millions of dollars in back wages. These dishonest and unprincipled contractors are still considered prequalified and are still bidding on and performing public work, throughout our state.

The language in Section 11 provides for the disclosure of settlements with DOL within the past five years of the application submission so that DAS is given the information needed to properly choose who should and should not be awarded public contracts. Providing DAS with this important information guarantees greater transparency within our government. We thank the committee for including this language in HB 5495 and urge you to support this bill.

**SB 473 An Act Concerning the State Contracting Standards Board - SUPPORT**

Following the contracting scandal that sent former Governor Rowland to prison, the General Assembly, and this committee in particular, took careful and deliberate steps to prevent further corruption by enacting policies to inject transparency and oversight into state contracting and procurement. A significant product of those efforts was to establish the State Contracting Standards Board, an independent Executive Branch agency charged with ensuring the effectiveness and integrity of state contracting and procurement processes. We were disappointed that Governor Lamont’s mid-term budget proposal flat funds and guts the authority of the State Contracting Standards Board. We thank the Committee for raising SB 473 which considerably strengthens the Board.

Sections 1 and 2 ensures that the Board will have the staff and resources it needs to do its work and will prevent a repeat of past years when the Board was not adequately funded. Thank you for including “notwithstanding” language to protect this funding and prevent the executive branch from using its rescission authority to cut or eliminate it. We are also grateful to see the bill set a minimum staffing level. This has been a bone of contention for many years with the result being that the Board currently functions with just one full-time employee and a very dedicated board of unpaid volunteer members. That is not sustainable, and this bill recognizes that.

SB 473 also gives the Board authority over quasi-public agency and municipal procurement. This is an important step in protecting taxpayer dollars and ensuring transparency. As we have seen of late, neither quasi-public agencies, nor municipalities, are immune from the same kind of corruption and mismanagement that led to the creation of the State Contracting Standards Board in the first place. They both provide vital government functions and deliver important services. They are both partially funded by state taxpayer dollars to employ thousands of people and control multi-million-dollar budgets. Taxpayers have a right to know that public dollars are being spent appropriately and effectively on contracting and procurement functions.

SB 473 makes major improvements in the State Contracting Standards Board. Requiring a minimum number of employees while protecting and expanding its authority will mean the Board can finally do its jobs. In the entirety of its existence, the Board has never been properly staffed or funded. Agencies have continued to execute contracts, the Board has been unable to provide the full scope of oversight for which it was created, sacrificing the savings of hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars. With SB 473, that will end. We urge the Committee to support this bill.

**SB 471 An Act Concerning Elections and State Voting Rights - SUPPORT**

As the Voting Rights Act of 1965 continues to be weakened within the federal courts, the need for a state-level Voting Rights Act is required now more than ever. The barriers that have excluded black and brown people from exercising their right to vote still persist and continue to threaten the integrity of our democracy. In fact, according to the Center for Public Integrity in 2020, Connecticut voters face some of the biggest obstacles outside of southern states.

The Connecticut Voting Rights Act will include expanded language assistance to those who do not speak English well and allow voters to file a lawsuit if they face voter intimidation or obstruction at the polls.

The right to vote must be protected. We urge the Committee to support this bill.

**HJ 114 Resolution Proposing an Amendment to the State Constitution to Permit No-Excuse Absentee Voting - SUPPORT**

The United States has one of the lowest voter participation rates in the developed world. One of the most common reasons people give for not voting is that they're too busy juggling the responsibilities of work and family. Well-intentioned employees, who may attempt to vote before or after work, are not always able to cast a ballot. Voter turnout, family responsibilities, weather, traffic, public transportation issues and other variables can make Election Day an especially chaotic workday. In order to ensure employees are able to exercise their constitutional right to vote, HJ 114 provides a remedy that many other states have already adopted – no-excuse absentee voting.

Neither federal nor Connecticut law requires employers to grant employees time off to cast their ballots. No-excuse absentee voting provides important flexibility to help workers be able to effectively manage their time to work and vote.

One silver lining of the COVID-19 pandemic was that in order to protect public health and safety, all Connecticut voters were allowed to vote by mail for the first time. The 2020 primary and general elections demonstrated that local and state election officials can manage a vote by mail system efficiently and securely. More than 650,000 registered voters voted by absentee ballot in the 2020 general election, boosting Connecticut's voter turnout to a record breaking 80%. That is a result of which we should be proud and one which we should strive to replicate.

HJ 114 strengthens our participatory democracy by giving voters maximum opportunity and flexibility to vote. We urge the Committee to support this resolution so voters themselves can decide if the state constitution should be amended to provide no-excuse absentee voting.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.